The Night in Fragments

—"This endless mercy mile

We're crawling side by side

With hell freezing over in our eyes

Gods kneel before our crime."

HIM - Wings of a Butterfly

And then Hong moved.

He pushed off the bar—and walked across the room. Not toward Est, exactly. Toward the window. Toward the part of the room where Est was standing, the part where the crowd was thinnest because it was farthest from the bar and the food and the center of gravity. Hong stopped beside him. Close. Closer than the Valentine's shoot had required, closer than the bar had permitted, the distance of a person who did not observe the standard margins of professional proximity because the standard margins did not interest him.

"You look really bored."

Hong's voice was flat. Direct. No warmth, no hostility, no inflection of deference—none of the reverent, hushed tone that everyone else used when speaking to Est.

He had caught Est off guard. Not with the approach—Est had seen him coming, had tracked his movement across the room with the passive, peripheral awareness of a person who always knew who was moving where, the way a body of water always knew where the stones were. But with the tone. The directness. The refusal to perform the script that everyone else at this party was performing. Hong had possibly never read it.

Est looked at him. Up close, the details resolved. The sheer shirt—black, the fabric translucent enough to suggest the body beneath without fully revealing it, a garment that existed in the space between showing and concealing, the same space Est's white Valentine's suit had occupied but with a different intent. The open collar of the leather vest. The silver chains, layered, three or four of them at different lengths, the shortest sitting against his collarbone, the longest reaching his sternum. The rings—every other finger, silver, heavy, the kind that left impressions.

And Hong smelled like leather and rebellion. Not cologne—Est, with his trained nose, with his cabinet of curated fragrances, would have identified cologne instantly, would have named it, placed it, cataloged it in the olfactory archive alongside the Tom Ford and the Byredo and the Le Labo. This wasn't cologne. This was the raw, unmediated scent of the materials Hong wore: the leather of the vest, warm and animal and faintly industrial; something metallic from the chains and the rings; the

trace of cigarette smoke that lived in the fibers of clothing the way memories lived in the body, permanent, absorbed, part of the material itself. And underneath all of it, something that was simply Hong—skin and warmth and the particular, unperformed scent of a person who existed without apology.

"You don't seem very interested either." Est said.

Hong laughed. Short. Sharp. A bark, almost—the laugh of a person who found things funny but didn't feel the need to perform the finding. "Everyone in here is trying to sell a version of themselves that doesn't exist." Hong said.

Est felt the sentence land. It landed in the place where true things landed—below the surface, below the armor, below the crimson turtleneck and the charcoal blazer and the controlled, precise exterior, in the space where the sponge-heart lived and absorbed and held. Because it was true. It was so true that hearing it spoken aloud—casually, flatly, without the decorative packaging that most people wrapped their truths in—was almost disorienting, the way hearing a word in your native language was disorienting after weeks of speaking a foreign one. The relief of recognition.

He looked at Hong's sheer shirt. He looked at the leather vest. He looked at the chains and the rings and the slicked-back gray hair and the eyeliner and the beer bottle and the whole composition of a person who was, by Hong's own admission, also selling a version of himself—but a version that at least acknowledged the sale, that at least had the honesty to say this is a performance rather than pretending it was reality.

His gaze fell lower. Not intentionally—but with the passive, automatic attention of a person who noticed everything, whose eyes moved across surfaces the way water moved across terrain: following the contours, filling the gaps, finding the details without seeking them.

The sheer shirt had shifted—riding up, the way shirts did on lean bodies that moved, the fabric pulling away from the waistband of the ripped jeans—and in the gap between the shirt and the jeans, on the skin of Hong's waist, visible for a moment before the fabric settled back, Est saw it.

A tattoo.

Gray. The color of Hong's hair—or the color that Hong's hair was pretending to be, or the color that both the hair and the tattoo shared, as if Hong had chosen his hair color to match his ink or his ink to match his future hair, a coordination so specific it had to be intentional, a visual rhyme between two surfaces of the same body.

The tattoo was a peony. Gray petals, detailed, the shading meticulous—the work of a skilled tattoo artist, someone who understood that a flower on skin was not the same as a flower on paper, that the body's curves and the skin's texture and the way the ink settled into the dermis all affected the final image, and had worked with

those variables rather than against them. The peony ran from Hong's waist downward—disappearing below the waistband, the full design invisible, the rest of it hidden by the jeans, by the leather, by all the layers of clothing and costume and persona that Hong wore between himself and the world.

A gray peony. On a man who wore ripped jeans and leather and enough silver to set off a metal detector. A delicate flower on a person whose entire exterior communicated hardness, edge, the distressed, grunge-adjacent aesthetic of someone who wanted the world to see him as tough.

Peonies often symbolize honor and bravery.

The thought came from nowhere—or from everywhere, from the accumulated, uncurated archive of things Est had read and absorbed and stored without filing, the stray facts that lived in the margins of his mind the way the jasmine lived in the margins of Bangkok's concrete: unplanned, persistent, blooming when they chose.

"I think yours might be the most honest one here." Est said.

Hong looked at him. The sentence had been oblique—intentionally, the way Est's sentences were always intentionally oblique, the precision of a person who said exactly what he meant but said it sideways, requiring the listener to turn the words in the light before the meaning resolved.

"My what?"

"Your version. Of yourself. That you're selling." Est paused. "You said everyone here is selling a version that doesn't exist. I think yours might actually exist."

Hong's expression changed. Not dramatically—the shifts so subtle that most people wouldn't notice them, the way most people didn't notice the millimeter adjustment of Est's collar. But Est noticed. Est always noticed. Then the smirk. The expression that Est was beginning to recognize as Hong's default setting.

"Careful, P'Est," Hong said. His voice was lower now—not a whisper, not intimate, just the natural volume reduction of a person who was saying something meant for one listener rather than a room. "If you stay around me too long, I'll ruin your 'perfect' image."

His silver rings glinted as he raised the beer bottle. The gesture caught the party's ambient light—the red and gold, the shifting colors—and scattered it in small, metallic bursts.

"I tend to distress everything I touch."

"Good," Est said. "I think I'm tired of being perfect."

The words just came. Unmediated. True. The verbal equivalent of the almost-smile

that Dana had identified—something that happened without Est knowing it was happening, something that bypassed the architecture of control and arrived in the world raw and unprocessed and real.

Hong looked at him. The smirk softened—not into a smile, not into warmth, but into something quieter. The recognition, again. One guarded person seeing another guarded person say something unguarded and understanding the cost of it.

"Nobody's tired of being perfect," Hong said. "People are tired of maintaining perfect. Different thing."

"Is it?"

"Yeah. Being perfect is easy. You were born with that face. You didn't earn it. The maintenance—that's the exhausting part. The constant vigilance. The making sure the surface never cracks. That's what you're tired of." Hong tilted his head. The chains shifted. "You're not tired of being perfect, P'Est. You're tired of being watched."

The sentence hit the sponge-heart like a stone hitting water—the impact, the concentric ripples, the disturbance spreading outward from the center. Because it was true. It was the truest thing anyone had said to him since Dana's it happened while you were looking. And it came from a person he'd met twice, a person whose last name he didn't know, a person who wore leather and silver and had a gray peony hidden beneath his jeans and drank beer at a party serving gold-flaked cocktails and said things like the narrative is a parasite with the flat certainty of someone who had stopped feeding his own parasites a long time ago.

Est opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

"How do you do that?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"Say things that are true without—making them sound like a diagnosis."

"I don't diagnose. I observe." Hong shrugged. "Same thing you do. You're just politer about it."

Hong watched the room. His expression returned to its baseline—the flat, unreadable surface that might have been boredom or might have been the specific, intentional blankness of a person who controlled his expressions the way Est controlled his collar: precisely, deliberately, millimeter by millimeter.

Then he jerked his chin.

The gesture was small. Directional. Est followed the gesture. A service door. The kind marked STAFF ONLY in small, unobtrusive letters—white text on a gray plaque, designed to be legible to the people who needed it and invisible to the people who didn't. The door was slightly ajar. Beyond it, the fluorescent edge of a stairwell.

He looked at the decorations—the banners, the lilies, the polished black floors reflecting the red and gold. He looked at the door. He looked at Hong.

"Where does that go?" Est asked.

"Up."

"Up where?"

"Does it matter?"

Est considered the question.

He didn't ask where they were going. He didn't ask why. He didn't ask any of the questions that a cautious, professional, brand-conscious person should ask before following a near-stranger through a service door at a corporate party.

He followed. Without a word.

The door opened onto a stairwell. Concrete. Fluorescent-lit. The institutional aesthetic of a space that existed for function rather than impression—no polished floors here, no banners, no gold. Just stairs and walls and the humming overhead lights that made everyone look slightly green, slightly less beautiful, slightly more human.

They went up. One flight. Their footsteps echoed—Est's quiet, the soft-soled shoes he'd chosen for the party; Hong's louder, the heavy, deliberate tread of boots on concrete, each step a small declaration of presence.

The stairs ended at another door—this one unmarked, heavier, the kind of door that opened onto a roof rather than a room. Metal. Slightly rusted at the hinges. Hong pushed it open with one hand, the other still holding the beer, and the night air hit them.

The roof was flat. Concrete. No decoration. No polished floors. No banners. No lilies. Just the raw, horizontal surface of a building's top, exposed to the sky and the weather and the specific, unmediated reality of being the highest point in a structure designed to contain reality below.

No glass railings. No ambient lighting. No curated view. Just concrete and sky and the city—Bangkok, from above, at night, in the full, unfiltered, unInstagrammable glory of its sprawl. The highways threading through the dark like luminous veins. The distant temples, their spires occasionally catching the light of a passing car or a

rooftop sign. The apartment towers, each window a small, private rectangle of life—someone reading, someone watching television, someone standing on their own balcony looking at their own version of this view and thinking their own thoughts.

The view was better than the party's view because it was not a view at all. It was simply the city, seen without intervention, without the mediation of glass railings and polished floors and the implicit instruction to admire. You didn't admire this view. You coexisted with it. You stood on the concrete and the city stood around you and neither of you performed anything for the other.

Hong walked to the edge. Leaned against a low concrete wall—the building's parapet, waist-high, rough-textured, the kind of surface that snagged on clothing and didn't apologize. He set the empty beer bottle on the parapet. It caught the distant light.

He pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his leather vest. The pack was soft—not the hard pack, not the neat rectangular box that maintained its shape and protected its contents with the structural integrity of a small building. The pack was slightly crushed, the corners bent, the brand logo partially obscured by a crease. It had been carried in the same pocket for a while. It was familiar. It was a companion.

Hong shook one out. Placed it between his lips—the motion practiced, automatic, the muscle memory of a habit that was older than his modeling career. He held the pack toward Est.

An offering. A small one. A cigarette held out in a silver-ringed hand, the gesture casual and unhesitant, the gesture of a person who was sharing something without making a production of it, without asking whether Est smoked, without the social preamble that most people attached to the offer of a vice.

"You don't have to hide it here." Hong said.

The sentence was quiet. Simple. Six words. But it carried a weight that had nothing to do with cigarettes and everything to do with hiding—with the specific, lifelong practice of concealment that Est had perfected, the hiding of cigarettes and exhaustion and authentic impulses and the parts of himself that might violate the conditions of someone else's love.

Not I know you smoke. Not I saw you at the party looking like you wanted one. Just: here is a space where the thing you hide doesn't need to be hidden. Here is a margin. Here is a roof. Here is the sky. You can be the version of yourself that smokes.

He flicked a silver Zippo—not a disposable lighter, not the cheap plastic kind you bought at a convenience store and threw away. The flame appeared—small, steady, the warm orange light illuminating his face for a moment: the gray hair, the sharp features, the curved mouth with the cigarette between the lips. The flame caught

the silver of his rings and threw tiny reflections onto the concrete—small, dancing points of light that looked, for a second, like the gold stars on the twins' welcome sign, scattered and bright and uncalculated.

Est took the cigarette.

He put it between his lips. Leaned toward the Zippo. The flame met the paper. The tobacco caught. The first pull—the familiar, warm, slightly burning sensation of smoke entering the lungs—was not pleasure, exactly, and not relief, exactly, but something adjacent to both: the specific, complicated satisfaction of doing a thing he had denied himself, in a space where the denial was not required.

He exhaled. The smoke rose—white against the dark sky, dissipating, merging with Bangkok's ambient haze.

"When did you know?" Est asked. "That I smoke."

"You hold things like a smoker. The way you held the sparkling water glass. Index finger and middle finger. The grip."

"Most people don't notice that."

"Most people aren't paying attention." Hong lit his own cigarette. The Zippo snapped shut. "You also did the thing—at the Valentine's shoot, during the breaks. You went to the door. You didn't go outside, but you went to the door. Like your body knew what it wanted and your mind stopped it."

"My mind stops a lot of things."

"I bet it does."

They smoked in silence for a moment. The city below. The party below the city—the muffled bass of the party's music rising through the concrete, the vibration more felt than heard, a physical sensation in the soles of the feet. Two people standing on a roof, smoking, not speaking, the silence between them full and companionable and utterly unlike the silence of the party, which was the silence of things being not said for strategic reasons. This was the silence of things being not said because they didn't need to be.

"I'm tired of being the person everyone wants to take a photo with," Est said, "but no one wants to actually talk to."

He hadn't planned to say it. The sentence arrived the way the almost-smile arrived—unbidden, unfiltered, bypassing the editorial process. The cigarette had loosened something. Or the roof had. Or the distance from the polished floors and the gold flakes and the performative laughter. Or Hong—Hong's presence, Hong's directness, Hong's refusal to treat Est as an icon or an image or a product, Hong's willingness to stand beside him and say you look really bored as if boredom were an observable

weather condition and not a vulnerability.

Hong leaned his elbows on the parapet. He looked out at the city. He did not respond immediately—the pause not performative, not strategic, but the pause of a person who was actually thinking, who treated the act of responding to another person's honesty as something that deserved thought rather than reflex.

Then he pulled out his phone.

The phone was cracked. The screen spider-webbed in one corner, the damage old and unrepaired, the crack of a person who dropped things and didn't replace them, who treated objects as functional rather than precious, who did not share Est's instinct toward careful, deliberate maintenance.

Hong tapped the screen a few times—his silver-ringed fingers moving across the cracked glass with the casual ease of a person who had memorized the geography of his own phone's damage and knew which parts of the screen still responded—and then turned the phone toward Est.

The image on the screen was blurry. High-contrast—It showed a warehouse door. Industrial. Metal. The surface covered in graffiti—layers of it, tags and throw-ups and pieces, the visual language of a culture that communicated through walls, that wrote its thoughts on surfaces that didn't belong to it and made those surfaces more interesting than the people who owned them had ever intended.

Below the photo was a pin. A location. An industrial district in a part of Bangkok that Est had never visited—The Bangkok that existed beneath the Bangkok that was sold. Hong looked at Est. The boredom was gone from his eyes—completely, fully, replaced by something else, something that had been underneath the boredom the entire time, waiting.

"You want 'Lunar Opulence,'" Hong said, jerking his chin toward the floor, toward the party below, the muffled bass and the distant laughter, "or you want something real?"

Est looked at the cigarette in his hand. The cherry glowing orange, the ash growing, the smoke rising in a thin, lazy spiral that the night air caught and dispersed. He looked at the city—the same city he saw from his balcony every morning, the same city that had softened his shoulders on the plane, the same city that had wrapped him in heat and jasmine and the insistent, generous warmth of a place that didn't ask him to be less than he was.

He looked at Hong.

Hong looked at him. The dark eyes, the eyeliner, the smirk that was always half-ready, the silver chains catching the city's reflected light. The face of a person who was offering an exit—not from the party, not from the building, but from the entire

evening's premise, from the premise that being seen at a corporate event was the same as being alive, from the lie that attendance was participation and visibility was presence.

Est dropped the cigarette. Crushed it under his expensive shoe—the dark shoe that had been chosen for the party, for the polished floors, for the careful, curated context of Lunar Opulence. The orange cherry died against the concrete with a small, decisive sound.

"Something real." he said.

He walked through the service door. He descended the stairs. He followed Hong—the leather vest, the silver chains, the gray hair catching the fluorescent light of the stairwell in flashes of industrial silver—down and down and down, away from the opulence, away from the gold, away from the version of himself that was perfect and fake and so, so tired.

The stairwell was ugly. Functional. The walls were unpainted cinder block, the stairs bare concrete, the handrail metal and slightly greasy from the hands of hundreds of service workers and caterers and maintenance staff who used these stairs daily, whose labor made the polished floors above possible and whose existence the polished floors above erased.

Their footsteps echoed. Hong's boots and Est's shoes, the sounds mismatched, the rhythm uncoordinated, two people walking together who hadn't yet found a shared cadence and weren't trying to.

Behind him, above him, the party continued. The laughter. The drinks. The ring lights and the artificial halos. The polished floors reflecting the red and gold banners. The expensive lilies releasing their too-sweet scent into the too-cool air. None of it noticed he was gone. The party was a machine, and machines didn't notice the absence of individual components; they just continued operating, the remaining components absorbing the slack, the function uninterrupted.

They didn't tell their managers. The thought arrived and Est received it—the thought of Dana, somewhere on the rooftop, conducting her reconnaissance, checking her phone, trusting that Est was where he needed to be. He should text her. The responsible voice—the cautious, professional voice that had governed his behavior for six years—said: text her. Tell her you're leaving. Tell her you're with someone. Be the person who communicates.

He didn't text her.

The decision was not impulsive. It was precise. It was the deliberate, conscious choice of a person who had spent his entire life communicating his movements to

other people—managers, partners, brands, audiences—and was, for the first time, choosing not to. Choosing the silence. Choosing the margin. Choosing to move through the world without narrating the movement.

They simply walked down the back stairs and out through a service entrance—a fire door that opened onto a side street, a narrow alley that smelled like kitchen grease and the sweet decay of a dumpster and the night air, which was warm and heavy and free.

Hong stepped to the curb. He raised one hand—the gesture of a person hailing a taxi in a city where taxis were hailed by gestures rather than apps, the lifted hand communicating here, now, take me somewhere with the economy of a single motion—and within seconds, a taxi materialized from the stream of traffic with the almost supernatural responsiveness of Bangkok's taxi fleet, which seemed to operate on a frequency that was part commerce and part telepathy.

The taxi was neon pink. The color was aggressive, unapologetic—a color that existed not to blend but to be seen, a color that said I am a taxi and I am pink and if you have a problem with that, hail a different one. The interior was upholstered in what appeared to be red velvet, though it might have been a synthetic that was performing redness and softness with the commitment of a material that had decided to be something other than what it was.

"Where to?" the driver asked in Thai, his voice the casual, unhurried voice of a man who had been driving this route for years and would drive it for years more and was neither excited nor bored by the prospect.

Hong gave the address. The industrial district. The pin on the cracked phone.

Est did not look back. He got in the taxi. The door closed. The neon pink vehicle merged into traffic—the slow, negotiated, horn-punctuated traffic of Bangkok at night—and the company building receded behind them, the glass and concrete and the thirty floors shrinking in the rear window until it was just another building in a city full of buildings, just another glass surface reflecting light it hadn't generated.

"Your manager is going to worry." Hong said.

"She'll text."

"Will you answer?"

"Later."

"Later." Hong repeated. Not a question. An observation. The observation of a person noting that Est had chosen later instead of now and understanding what the choice meant—that for the first time, Est was prioritizing his own timeline over someone else's.

The taxi moved through the city. The neon pink exterior caught the street lights and the signs and the ambient glow of Bangkok's commercial districts, reflecting colors Est hadn't seen from his balcony: the green of a pharmacy sign, the yellow of a noodle shop, the deep red of a temple's roof illuminated by spotlights, the city painting itself on the surface of the taxi as they passed through it.

"Where are we going?" Est asked.

"I showed you."

"You showed me a photo of a warehouse door."

"That's where we're going."

"What's inside?"

Hong looked at him. The smirk. The chains. The eyes that had been unreadable at the party and were now, in the taxi's dim interior, merely dark—dark and steady and looking at Est with an expression that was not boredom and not warmth but something between: interest, maybe, or the kind of attention that a person gave to something they hadn't yet categorized.

The building was not what Est had expected.

Not a warehouse, exactly, though it had the bones of one: a large, rectangular structure, metal walls, a flat roof. Industrial architecture—But it had been transformed. The entrance was marked not by a sign but by a quality of light—a blue-violet glow that spilled from the doorway and pooled on the sidewalk, mixing with the amber of the street lamps and producing a color that existed only in this specific intersection, this specific moment, the way certain colors existed only in certain weather or certain times of day, ephemeral, unrepeatable, the visual equivalent of a phrase you heard once and never again.

People moved in and out of the entrance. Dressed in ways that communicated identity rather than strategy—the clothes chosen not to be photographed but to be worn, not to perform a brand but to express a person. No photocopied influencers. No models with the latest haircuts. No one holding a ring light. No one curating their appearance for an algorithm. Just people. Moving through a door. Going somewhere.

"What is this place?" Est asked.

"It's a lot of things. Depends on the night."

"And tonight?"

Hong looked at him. "Tonight it's exactly what you need."

He didn't elaborate. He walked toward the entrance. A person at the door—a woman, short, with close-cropped hair and a nose ring and the calm, assessing expression of someone who had been deciding who got in and who didn't for long enough that the process had become intuitive—held up a phone displaying a QR code scanner.

Hong pulled out his cracked phone, tapped the screen with the practiced ease of a person who had done this many times, and the scanner beeped. A transaction completed. Digital handshake. The modern version of the secret knock.

The gatekeeper looked at Est. The assessment was brief—professional, not invasive, the look of a person who was reading him not for beauty or status but for something else, something less definable. Whether he belonged. Whether the space would be safe with him in it.

She reached into a box and produced two wristbands—fabric, not plastic, woven, the colors dark.

Est held out his wrist. The band cinched. The fabric slider tightened against his skin—snug, not tight, the pressure of a gentle, impersonal commitment: you're in now. You're part of this. For tonight, this space includes you.

"Welcome." the woman said. Simple. No deference.

They went inside.

The sound hit him first.

Techno—something rawer, something with texture and weight, the bass frequencies felt in the chest before they were heard by the ears, the music operating at a level that bypassed the auditory system and communicated directly with the body.

The space was large. Open. The warehouse bones visible—the exposed ceiling beams, the metal walls, the concrete floor. Lights moved across the surfaces—not the party's curated, strategic lighting but something more organic, more chaotic, blue and purple and occasional bursts of white, the lights responding to the music or the music responding to the lights, the two systems entwined, symbiotic, producing an atmosphere that was not designed but emergent.

And although Est had expected something worse—had expected, perhaps, the grimy, neglected aesthetic that the word warehouse suggested, the sticky floors and the questionable bathrooms and the ambient seediness of a space that existed outside the margins of respectability—the place was actually very clean. Surprisingly clean. The floors swept. The surfaces wiped. The bar—a long, well-stocked, professionally staffed bar that ran along one wall—gleaming with the organized precision of a business that took itself seriously even if its clientele did not.

The cleanliness said something. It said: we are not performing dirtiness for aesthetic effect. We are not pretending to be underground. We are underground, and we are clean, because the people who come here deserve a clean space, and the space itself deserves care.

And outside—visible through open double doors at the back of the warehouse—an outdoor area. Grass. Real grass, growing in patches between concrete slabs, the wild, unkempt grass of a space that had not been landscaped but had simply been allowed to exist, allowed to grow where it wanted, the vegetative equivalent of the people inside: unmanaged, unmanicured, free.

People were sitting on the grass, on the concrete, on mismatched metal chairs arranged around a fire pit—a real fire, burning in a metal bowl, the flames casting an amber glow that competed with the blue-violet of the interior and produced, at the threshold between inside and outside, a color that was neither warm nor cool but both, a color that existed only at boundaries.

Modern food trucks were parked along the perimeter—three or four of them, their serving windows lit and busy, the smells of their cooking mixing with the woodsmoke and the night air: grilled meat, garlic, something sweet and caramelized, the particular, multilayered scent of food being made with care by people who cared about making it.

Hong moved through the crowd with casual authority—the authority of a person who knew the space, who had been here before, who understood its rhythms and its rules and its specific, unspoken social contract. His silver chains swayed in the shifting lights. His boots moved across the clean concrete floor with the unhurried tread of someone who was home—or if not home, then somewhere adjacent to home, somewhere the body relaxed and the mask, if not removed, at least loosened.

This was Hong's territory. That was clear. Not in the possessive sense—not the territory of ownership—but in the ecological sense, the territory of habitat. This was where Hong's particular species thrived. The warehouse, the music, the fire pit, the food trucks, the absence of ring lights and gold flakes and the polished, performative infrastructure of corporate celebration. This was where Hong could be the version of himself that the company building's rooftop could not accommodate.

Est followed. His blazer and crimson turtleneck were wrong here—too structured, too curated, too clearly the costume of a person who had dressed for a different party in a different world. He was aware of it. He was aware that he stood out—not because of his face, not because of the jaw and the cheekbones that sold watches and fragrances, but because of the mismatch, the visual dissonance of a man in charcoal and crimson amid the denim and the leather and the oversized vintage t-shirts of a crowd that had dressed to disappear rather than to be seen.

He was a turtleneck in a room of open collars.

"You look like you're finally breathing, P'Est."

Hong's voice, half-turned, speaking over his shoulder as he navigated toward the bar. The observation was casual—tossed off, almost afterthought, the way Hong delivered all his observations: directly, without ceremony, without the buffer of social softening.

"I am," Est said. And realized, with the startled, almost physical recognition of a body discovering something the mind hadn't noticed, that it was true. His shoulders—the shoulders that had been tightening since he walked into the company rooftop, since the first wave of networking laughter, since the stargazer lilies and the gold flakes and the weight of being looked at—had dropped. Not fully. Not the complete, boneless release of total relaxation. But enough. Enough to notice. Enough to feel the difference between clenched and unclenched, between the shape he'd been holding and the shape his body actually wanted.

He was breathing. Not the shallow, controlled breathing of a person managing his presence—the breathing he did on set, the breathing he did at parties, the measured inhalations and exhalations that were as much performance as physiological function. He was breathing the way you breathed when you forgot to monitor your breathing. Naturally. Without supervision.

The music helped. The bass was not demanding—it was not asking him to dance or to respond or to perform any particular reaction. It was simply present, the way the heat was present, the way the fire was present, a condition of the space rather than a request.

The Dirty Martini tasted like itself.

Like olives and attitude and the specific, uncompromising clarity of a cocktail that did not pretend to be anything other than what it was. It tasted like honesty. Est drank it, and the taste sat on his tongue the way good scents sat in his nose—persistently, unforgettably, the sensory equivalent of a sentence that was exactly right.

"Upstairs." Hong said, nodding toward a narrow metal staircase at the side of the warehouse—industrial, open-tread, the kind of staircase that was more ladder than architecture, the kind that vibrated when people used it.

Est followed.

The staircase moved. Slightly. A low hum of metal under shared weight, the bolts doing their honest work. The metal was cool under his hand. He counted the steps

without meaning to—twelve—because his brain did that, collected numbers and textures and filed them away in the cabinet where he kept things that might matter later and things that would never matter but were too precise to discard.

Upstairs.

The music was quieter here. Couples, groups, individuals—sitting, talking, drinking, existing in the low-light, bass-humming atmosphere of a second floor that felt like a living room built by someone who loved strangers. The conversations were quieter here—not the networking drone of the company party but the real, low, rhythmic exchanges of people who had nothing left to prove.

And in the center of the space, rising from the floor like a sculpture—a structure.

Metal. Large—twelve feet tall, maybe more, a framework of welded steel that supported, at its top, a horizontal bar from which hung strips of fabric—long, flowing, silk or something like silk, in colors that caught the low light and turned it soft: red, blue, white, gold. The fabric strips were still—A hula hoop hung from the same framework—the circular apparatus that aerialists used for performances, suspended by two cables, motionless now but carrying the specific, charged stillness of an object that had recently been in use and was still warm from the body that had used it.

A structure for aerial acrobatics. In a warehouse. At a party. At 1 AM.

Est looked at it the way he looked at perfume bottles in shops he hadn't entered yet—with the quiet, precise hunger of a collector who had identified something worth understanding.

"You bring all your coworkers here?" Est asked, his voice low enough that the question was private.

Hong didn't look at him. "Only the ones who look like they need it."

Est considered being offended. Decided against it. The observation was too accurate to argue with.

Hong led him toward one of the sofas occupied by a single person who was sitting, legs slightly apart, elbows on knees, someone who had been here for a while and was in no hurry to leave.

The person was a man. About Est's size—tall, broad-shouldered, the kind of build that suggested regular, disciplined physical activity. Stronger, though—visibly stronger, the muscles of his arms and chest evident even under his clothes, the body of a person who spent serious time in a gym and did not do it for aesthetics alone but for something deeper, something that was more meditation than exercise.

He was drinking a sugar-free soda. The can was on the table in front of him, the

condensation pooling on a cardboard coaster that had been folded and re-folded, the nervous geometry of a man whose hands needed occupation.

He was wearing a white tank top. Clean—startlingly clean for a warehouse party, the fabric tight enough to show the architecture of his chest and shoulders without being deliberately revealing. Over the tank, an open cream-colored vest that hung loose, unbuttoned, the fabric light and slightly textured—linen, maybe, or a linen blend. Gray pants. A black belt. The outfit was simple. The kind of simple that was either effortless or the result of a man who wore dark colors at work and chose lighter ones when the work was done.

And on his chest, a tattoo. Black ink, the lines visible but not fully legible, partially obscured by the tank top's neckline, the design extending from the sternum outward—organic, flowing, the lines following the contours of the body beneath them, respecting the musculature, the bone, the architecture. Not a drawing placed on skin. A drawing that understood the skin. The tattoo extended up—over the chest, onto the shoulder, where it was more visible: black ink on bare skin, the lines detailed, deliberate, the work of someone who knew anatomy and treated the human body as canvas rather than surface.

He looked up when Hong approached. His face changed. Not dramatically—his resting expression was serious, the features strong, the jaw set, the kind of face that in repose communicated authority or distance—but the change was real. The slight softening around the eyes, the mouth relaxing from its default line into something warmer, the micro-expression that was not a smile but was the foundation on which a smile could be built. The genuine warmth of someone who was happy to see a specific person and did not need to announce it.

He greeted Hong openly. His arm went around Hong's waist—not possessively, but with the easy, gravitational certainty of a gesture that had been performed hundreds of times and would be performed hundreds more. The pull was gentle. Hong went to him without resistance, the sarcastic, flat-voiced model from the company party briefly disappearing into the orbit of a person who seemed to function as a fixed point.

The man seemed unaware of Est. Not rude—simply operating within the natural priority system of affection, because the person you were greeting was the person who mattered in that moment, and the person behind them could wait.

"You smell like corporate despair." the man said to Hong. His voice was deep. Not the performative bass of someone trying to sound authoritative, but the natural, low register of a chest that was built to resonate.

Hong snorted. "That's the cologne they gave us. Free samples. I'm a walking PR nightmare."

"You're always a walking PR nightmare."

"That's why you love me."

The man's expression didn't change, but something moved behind his eyes—a flicker, fast, the kind of thing that only someone who had been trained to observe micro-expressions at a hundred castings would catch. Est caught it. Filed it. Moved on.

"He works with me." Hong said, tilting his head toward Est.

The man's eyes moved. Dark, steady, the eyes of a person who assessed before reacting, who took in information the way a surgeon took in vitals—clinically, thoroughly, without rushing. They moved from Est's face to his clothes to his hands to his face again, and the assessment was completed in under two seconds and communicated nothing except attention.

"I'm sorry you have to put up with him." the man said. His voice was warm. Deep, yes, but warm—the warmth of a person who used humor to build bridges rather than walls, who made the joke not to distance but to include. "It's a pleasure to meet you, though you're late to the show," he added, and his eyes moved to the aerial structure behind them, the still silks, the motionless lyra.

"Nut," he said, extending his hand.

Est took it. The handshake was firm. Not aggressive.

"Est," he said. "Nice to meet you."

"Was it good?" Est asked.

Nut looked at him. The serious face. Then—a smile. Sudden, disarming, the smile of a person who didn't smile often enough and therefore made each one count. His teeth were straight, white, perfect—the teeth of a man whose father was a plastic surgeon, Est would learn later, though in this moment they were simply teeth that transformed a serious face into a beautiful one.

"It's always good," Nut said. "Even when it terrifies me."

They sat. They drank. They talked.

Hong was friendlier now—whether it was the place or the purple cocktail he'd acquired from somewhere or the proximity to Nut, who seemed to function as a kind of emotional anchor for Hong, grounding the sarcasm, softening the edges. The flatness in Hong's voice was still there, but it was textured now—layered with the slight, barely perceptible warmth of a person who was allowing himself to be comfortable.

"So how long have you been modeling?" Nut asked Est, and the question was not the industry question—not the who's-your-agency, what's-your-reach interrogation—but a genuine question, the kind asked by someone who was interested in the answer.

"Since I was eighteen."

"Do you like it?"

The question landed. Not hard—Nut didn't throw things hard; he placed them precisely—but it landed in the specific, unprotected place where Est kept the answer he never gave at castings or interviews or brand meetings.

"I'm good at it," Est said. Which was true. And which was not an answer.

Nut heard the difference. His eyes held Est's for a moment—a beat too long for casual conversation, a beat that said I noticed what you did there—and then he nodded, once, and let it go. The way a person who understood boundaries let things go. Not with force. With respect.

"He's being modest," Hong said, swirling his purple drink. "He's one of the best at the agency."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said about me," Est said.

"Don't get used to it. I'm mildly drunk."

"You're always mildly drunk."

"That's why I'm always mildly nice."

Nut watched the exchange. His smile was small, private—the smile of a person who was witnessing something and finding it good.

"What do you do?" Est asked, redirecting toward Nut, because the collector's instinct demanded reciprocity and because the tattoos on the man's body were not the tattoos of a person who merely had tattoos but of a person who understood them.

"I'm a tattoo artist," Nut said. "And a student. Art."

"He's being modest too," Hong said. "His waiting list is three months long. People fly in from other countries."

Nut shook his head. Slightly. The head-shake of a person who was uncomfortable with praise, who would rather be the one giving it. "Hong exaggerates."

"I literally never exaggerate. It's one of my worst qualities."

"You literally always exaggerate."

"Only about the things that matter, babe."

The word—babe—slipped out. Casual. Unexamined. The kind of word that was either a habit or a confession. Hong didn't seem to notice he'd said it. Nut did. The flicker behind the eyes again—the same flicker Est had caught earlier, the one that was too fast for anyone who wasn't looking for it.

Est filed it. The cabinet was filling.

Nut listened more than he spoke. When he did speak, his words had the quality of objects he'd turned over in his hands first, examined from multiple angles, ensured were solid before placing them into the conversation. He asked Est about fragrance—not the surface question—and Est, surprised by the precision of the inquiry, found himself answering honestly.

Est sipped his Dirty Martini and listened and absorbed and felt, for the first time in—he couldn't remember how long—the specific, rare, almost physiological relief of being in a social situation that was not draining him.

"Downstairs," Hong said, after a while. "There's food. And people you should meet."

"More people?" Est raised an eyebrow.

"Better people," Hong said. Then, glancing at Nut: "No offense."

"None taken." Nut stood. He moved the way large men who were aware of their largeness moved—carefully, with a contained grace that suggested he was constantly, unconsciously calculating the distance between his body and everything breakable around it.

The descent felt like leaving the machine and returning to the earth.

As they moved away from the thumping techno of the interior, the air cooled, carrying the scent of woodsmoke and roasted garlic. The bass faded, replaced by the lower, softer sounds of the outdoor space—conversations, laughter, the pop and hiss of a fire that was large enough to be felt from twenty feet away.

The outdoor area was a sharp contrast to the blue-lit intensity upstairs. It was an urban garden of sorts—patches of wild grass growing between concrete slabs, the grass illuminated by the flickering amber glow of the large fire pit. The fire was real—not decorative, not the gas-powered, controlled flame of a rooftop lounge, but a real wood fire in a metal bowl, the logs charred and collapsing, the flames irregular and alive, the smoke rising in a column that bent with the wind.

People weren't posing here. They were slumped in mismatched metal chairs, their legs stretched toward the heat, their drinks forgotten on the ground beside them—the loose, horizontal postures of people who had been at a party long enough that the party had stopped being an event and started being a place.

A figure near the fire saw them coming and stood.

"Hey." The voice was warm—a gravelly baritone, the kind of voice that sounded like it had been aged in woodsmoke, the kind that carried effortlessly across an outdoor space without needing to raise its volume. "I thought you weren't coming. You had a work party today." The sentence was addressed to Hong but the body was already moving toward the group, the posture open, the energy of someone who filled spaces without demanding them.

The figure stepped into the firelight, and Est saw him.

Slightly tanned skin—the kind of tan that came from being outside regularly, from shooting on rooftops and walking through neighborhoods and knowing where the best sunset views were. Brown hair, slightly messy, the mess of a person who had styled it earlier and had since stopped caring. He wore glasses sometimes, Est would later learn—for reading only—but not now, not here. His ears were pierced—small studs, understated, the kind of piercings that a person got because they wanted them and not because they were making a statement.

He was wearing a white t-shirt with large letters that said SOLD OUT—Ripped jeans. The rips were not manufactured—they were real, earned, the jeans of a person who knelt on concrete to get the right angle and climbed fences to reach the right rooftop. The outfit was casual, comfortable, the wardrobe of a person who dressed for function and personality rather than trend.

Hong smiled. A genuine smile. Not the smirk, not the flat expression, not the sarcastic curve—the real thing, rare enough that Est noticed it and filed it in the cabinet alongside the word babe and the arm around the waist and the flicker behind Nut's eyes.

"I took enough pictures at the beginning to escape," Hong said, "though I missed the show."

"You missed Lego doing the thing where he drops from the top and catches himself at the last second. I thought Nut was going to pass out." Tui's hands moved when he talked—not wildly, but expressively, the gesture of the near-fall recreated in miniature with his fingers, the catch mimed with a sudden closing of his fist.

Nut, behind them, made a sound. A low, protesting rumble. Tui grinned. The grin was wide, easy, the grin of a person who collected other people's emotions and found them fascinating rather than exhausting. Hong laughed—the short, sharp burst that was more punctuation than sound.

"Nut always thinks he's going to fall."

"He drops from twelve feet—"

"With silks, Nut. He has silks. That's the entire point."

"The point is that my blood pressure doesn't know the difference between choreographed falling and actual falling."

Est listened. He absorbed. He filed the names—Nut, Lego, Tui, the unnamed show, the aerial structure, the almost-falling, the catching—in the growing cabinet labeled with the night's accumulating data. Each name arrived with a constellation of associated details: Nut's hesitation, Tui's warmth, the word babe, the aerial silks that someone climbed and someone else watched with hands that couldn't stay still.

"Nice to meet you," Tui said, turning to Est and extending his hand. "Tui."

The handshake was different from Nut's—lighter, quicker, the handshake of a person who was social by nature rather than by effort, who made friends the way some people breathed, automatically, without the conscious, deliberate labor that friendship required for Est.

"Est."

"The model," Tui said. Not as a question. As recognition.

"The photographer?" Est returned, because Tui's hands had the particular, slightly rough quality of hands that were frequently washed in chemicals, and because the vintage camera sitting on the arm of his metal chair was not a prop.

Tui's eyes lit up. The recognition went both ways—the shared language of people who understood that observation was not a hobby but a condition.

"Guilty." Tui picked up the camera—a Nikon, old, the body scarred with the particular wear pattern of a tool that was used constantly and loved unconditionally. "I was shooting earlier. The fire does incredible things to skin tones."

"You photograph fire?"

"I photograph everything. Fire, rain, rust, people who don't know they're being photographed." He paused. Recalibrated. "That sounds creepier than I meant it to."

"It sounds honest," Est said.

Tui looked at him. The look was brief, appreciative—the look of a person who valued honesty and had just encountered it unexpectedly.

"I like you already," Tui said. Then, to Hong: "Why didn't you bring him sooner?"

"We met a week ago, literally." Hong said.

"No excuse."

They took shots. Someone produced a bottle—mezcal, the good kind, smoky and clean—and small glasses appeared with the particular, practiced efficiency of a group that had done this ritual many times.

Est watched the others. Hong took a shot without hesitation—tipping the glass, swallowing, his expression unchanging, the shot absorbed by his body the way a sponge absorbed frequencies, without visible effect. Nut took one—his first drink of the night that wasn't sugar-free soda, his hand steady, his expression suggesting that this was a concession to the moment rather than a habit. Tui took one—easily, naturally, the shot fitting into his hand the way the camera fit beside him, the consumption of alcohol as social language rather than need.

When everyone was drinking, Est drank too. The mezcal was warm. The smoke of it met the smoke of the fire and the two became one taste—charred, honest, the flavor of things that had been transformed by heat and were better for it.

The metal chair was cold through his blazer. The blazer that belonged to the company party, to the before, to the version of the night that had been about networking and brand alignment and the performance of professional enthusiasm. Here, the blazer was wrong. Here, the blazer was a costume from a show that had already closed.

The fire was warm on his face. The smoke drifted. The metal chair held him.

And then they introduced him to William.

William was sitting in the next chair. He hadn't stood up immediately—not out of rudeness but out of the specific, slightly awkward hesitation of a person who was deciding how to greet a stranger and wanted to get it right before committing to the gesture. He had been there the whole time—present but peripheral, the way a person who had learned to disappear before he learned to see would naturally position himself in a group.

"Will," Tui said, leaning over and tapping William's knee. "This is Est. He works with Hong."

William stood then. The movement was careful—not the theatrical standing of a person making an entrance but the measured standing of a person who was managing the distance between himself and a new variable. "Hi," William said.

The voice was quiet. Not shy—not exactly—but calibrated, the volume of a person who had learned that speaking softly meant people had to lean in to listen, and leaning in meant they were paying attention, and attention was the only currency

that mattered

He sat, and Est sat beside him, and for a moment they existed in parallel—two people in metal chairs, facing the fire, their bodies angled slightly toward each other by the geometry of the seating arrangement.

He was handsome. Very handsome. The kind of handsome that was not dramatic or aggressive but quiet—the kind that arrived slowly, that didn't announce itself from across a room but revealed itself in increments, the way a photograph developed in a darkroom, the image emerging from blankness in stages, each stage more defined than the last. Clean skin—remarkably clean, the kind of clarity that came not from genetics alone but from discipline, from a routine, from the careful, daily labor of a person who treated their skin as a project and a practice. Dark brown hair. Brown eyes.

"You okay?" Est asked, because William had been quiet and because Est's empathy, the sponge-like, uncontrollable absorption that was both his gift and his exhaustion, had identified in William's posture the specific tension of a person who was present but not fully arrived.

William looked at him. The brown eyes. Surprised. Not at the question but at the fact that a stranger had asked it—had noticed the tension, had read the posture, had decided to address it directly.

"Yeah," William said. Then: "I'm not great at—" He gestured. The gesture was small, circular, encompassing the fire, the chairs, the group, the concept of this. "New people."

"Me neither," Est said.

William blinked. The blink of a person recalibrating an assumption.

"You seem like you'd be good at it," William said. "You have that—" He paused. Searching. "That presence."

"That's the modeling," Est said. "It teaches you to fill a room without being in it."

William considered this. His head tilted—slightly, the way a photographer tilted their head when finding an angle.

"That's a sad thing to be good at." William said.

The sentence arrived without warning. It was not unkind—William's voice carried no judgment, no pity, none of the performative compassion that Est had learned to identify and deflect. It was simply an observation. Clean, precise, the verbal equivalent of a photograph that captured exactly what it saw.

Est opened his mouth. Closed it. "Yeah," he said, after a moment. "It is."

They looked at the fire.

"What do you do?" Est asked. "Besides not being great at new people."

William smiled. The smile was small—the first one, Est realized, that he'd seen from him—and it was worth the wait. It changed his face the way light changed a room. Not dramatically. Essentially.

"Photography," William said. "I'm a student."

"What do you shoot?"

"The things people try to hide." Then: "That also sounds creepier than I meant it."

"That's the second time tonight someone's said that to me," Est said.

"Who was the first?"

"Tui."

"That makes sense. He taught me the word geosmin."

"What's geosmin?"

"The chemical compound that makes rain smell like rain. It's produced by bacteria in the soil. When it rains, the water hits the dirt and the geosmin goes airborne." William paused. His hands, Est noticed, had been resting in his lap, and the right one had moved—subtly, unconsciously—to touch his jaw, the fingers checking the skin there, a gesture that was not vanity but something older, something habitual and self-soothing. "He told me about it when I started doing cyanotypes. Because the process smells like—well, like chemicals. And rain. And old things."

"You do cyanotypes?"

"It's a monochrome printing process. You coat paper with chemicals and expose it to UV light. The result is—blue. This deep, precise blue."

He was talking now. Really talking—the shyness retreating, replaced by the specific, focused energy of a person discussing the thing they loved, the thing that made the world make sense. His hands moved. Not like Tui's—not broad, social gestures—but small, precise ones, miming the process, the coating, the exposing, the rinsing, the revealing.

"Your hands," Est said. "Are they—"

William looked at his fingers. Turned them over. In the firelight, Est could see it—a faint discoloration at the tips, a bluish cast that wasn't dirt or shadow but chemical.

"Blue," William said. "They're always a little blue. The ferric ammonium citrate

stains."

The boy with blue-stained hands. The detail filed itself. No—it didn't file itself. It placed itself prominently, in the front of the cabinet, in the place where Est kept the things that mattered.

Next to him sat Hong. Who reached into his jacket pocket and produced a pack of cigarettes—not the brand from the company party, not the kind given as gifts, but his own, the personal pack, the one that was creased and familiar in his hand.

Who offered him a cigarette.

Whether drunk or kind, it didn't matter anymore. The cigarette was offered. The offering was genuine. The pack extended, the filter end pointed toward Est, the universal gesture of take one, I'm not judging.

Est looked at the cigarette. He thought, briefly, of the model's facade—the clean lungs, the clean image, the clean contract that had a clause about maintaining a lifestyle consistent with brand values. He thought of his manager, Dana, who didn't know. He thought of the climate-controlled shelf in his apartment, the hundred perfumes arranged by mood, the vetiver and iris and cold glass world he had built to keep everything controlled.

He took it.

Hong lit it for him. The lighter was silver, scratched, a Zippo that had been carried and used and customized—a tiny skull sticker on one side, partially peeled.

Est inhaled. The nicotine reached the receptors that had been starved for hours—the long, disciplined hours of the company party where he did not smoke because he was being watched, where the facade held because the architecture of his professionalism demanded it. The relief was immediate, chemical, the body's quiet gratitude for a substance it had been trained to want.

The smoke rose. The fire crackled.

William watched him. Not with judgment. With the specific, quiet attention of a photographer who had noticed a detail—the way Est held the cigarette, the way his shoulders dropped, the way the first exhale changed his posture from architecture to person.

"You smoke?" William asked. Not an accusation. An observation.

"In secret," Est said. And then, surprised by his own honesty: "That's the first time I've admitted that out loud."

William nodded. Slowly. The nod of a person who understood secrets—who had his own, hidden on his back where only a mirror could see them.

"Your secret's safe," William said. Quietly. Simply. Without drama.

And it was. Est knew it was. The way you knew certain things—not from evidence, not from logic, but from the particular quality of a voice and the steadiness of the eyes above it.

And then arms went around Hong's neck. From behind—a body pressing against Hong's back, arms looping over his shoulders.

"Hoshi." The voice was bright. Warm. Musical in the way that some voices were musical—not trained, not performative, but naturally pitched in a register that made consonants soft and vowels sweet, the kind of voice that could say good morning and make it sound like a small gift.

Est turned.

Black hair. Styled in slightly messy space buns—two of them, positioned high, strands falling loose around the face. The face beneath them was—fine. Refined. The bone structure delicate, the features precise, the kind of face that in repose looked porcelain and in motion looked alive.

The eyes. Light-colored contact lenses—not the cheap, costume-store kind but the expensive, natural-looking kind, the kind that changed the eye color from dark to something luminous and slightly unsettling. They were beautiful. They were also, Est realized, intentional—not a vanity but a tool, a way of intensifying the gaze, of making the looking-at-you an event.

The clothes. A black skirt. A matching black t-shirt with gray scribble-like designs, the kind of design that was either abstract art or someone's actual doodles screen-printed onto fabric. A giant cardigan—oversized, falling off one shoulder, the fabric thick and soft and slightly fuzzy, the kind of garment that was less clothing than environment, a wearable blanket. Ripped tights. Platform boots—chunky, the soles thick, adding height to a frame that was the shortest in the group by a visible margin.

The makeup was amazing. Even now—even at 3 AM, even in the firelight that flattened colors and softened edges. Not perfectly—slightly smudged, the eyeliner migrating slightly at the corners, But the smudging didn't diminish the artistry. It enhanced it. It turned the makeup from product into diary entry, a record of the night's effort.

Rings. Multiple. Silver—the silver catching the firelight, winking, each ring a different design, a different weight. And the nails—long, black, detailed—each one a tiny artwork, the kind of nails that required a professional and a vision and a willingness to commit to a full week of impractical beauty.

A septum piercing. Circular. Small, elegant.

The overall effect was—

Est's brain offered the word ethereal, which was a word he used sparingly because it was overused in fashion and had been drained of meaning by a thousand mood boards, but here, in this specific context, the word was accurate. The person was ethereal. Not in the wispy, fragile sense. In the older sense—of the upper air, of a substance finer than anything terrestrial.

And a scent. The scent arrived with the person the way a color arrived with a sunset—inseparable, defining. Sweet. Strawberry—but not the natural strawberry of actual fruit, the synthetic, heightened strawberry of a product designed to make strawberry more strawberry than nature managed. And something else—warm, powdery, the frosted violet of an expensive perfume mixed with the chemical sweetness of something edible.

Hong smiled. Not the smirk—the smile. The genuine one, the one that Est had now seen twice and was beginning to understand was rare enough to function as currency. And he turned his head and kissed the person's cheek—a quick, easy kiss, the kiss of a person who kissed this particular cheek regularly and without ceremony, the way you kissed the cheek of someone who was family in everything but blood.

"Sorry I didn't make it to your show." Hong said.

"It's okay, you had work." The voice again—bright, forgiving, the voice of a person for whom forgiveness was not a deliberation but a reflex. "But Nuti recorded it if you want to see. He only panicked twice."

"Twice is an improvement," Hong said.

"I told him I was going to do the drop and he literally stood up."

"New nail design?" Hong said, taking the smaller, pale hand and holding it in the firelight, turning it, examining the nails with the serious, focused attention of a person who understood that this mattered. "They're cute."

"The cute ones take longest. Three hours."

"Worth it, Sweetheart." The word—Sweetheart—was said easily. Naturally. The nickname of an established relationship, a label that had been applied and accepted and worn smooth by use. "This is P'Est," Hong said it casually, with the particular Thai honorific that acknowledged Est was older, the formality a small, automatic courtesy.

"I'm Lego."

The name was said easy—offered, not announced, like a candy held out on an open palm. The hand extended. The handshake was warm—warmer than either Nut's or

Tui's, the hand lingering a beat longer, the fingers pressing slightly, the handshake of a person who used physical contact to read and communicate simultaneously.

Lego looked at him more closely. The light-colored eyes moved over Est's face with the specific, unself-conscious scrutiny of a person who was accustomed to looking—who performed under spotlights and in front of cameras and understood that looking and being looked at were both forms of intimacy.

"I know you," Lego said. "From social media."

Est didn't know what to do with that.

Then Hong interrupted. Standing up—or trying to stand up, because Lego was still hanging on his neck, the arms still draped, the body still pressed against Hong's back with the persistent, affectionate weight.

"He works with me," Hong said, extracting himself with the practiced patience of a person who had been extracted from this particular hold hundreds of times. "And he needs another drink."

"Oooh," Lego said. The sound was musical. Everything about Lego was musical. "I'll get a drink."

"You don't drink." Hong said.

"I'll get a tea. With ice. You know I love the ice here—they make the good kind, the crunchy kind."

"You eat ice." Est said. Not a question. An observation.

"I love eating ice," Lego said, and the enthusiasm was so genuine, so uncomplicated, so completely free of irony that Est felt something shift in his chest—a small, involuntary softening, the armor loosening a millimeter, the way a building settled in the heat.

"I'll get a drink," Hong said. "Do you want anything?"

The question was directed at the group. Orders emerged—a sugar-free soda for Nut, water for William, another mezcal for Tui, an unsweetened iced tea for Lego, specifically with the crunchy ice.

"I'll have another Dirty Martini," Est said. "Extra olives."

"Extra olives," Hong repeated. "Noted."

Nut was already standing—the movement synchronized, the unconscious choreography of two people whose bodies had learned to move in coordination. They left together—Hong's gray hair catching the firelight, Nut's broad shoulders filling the doorway—and Est watched them go and thought: they don't know what

they are yet.

And then it was the four of them—Est, William, Tui, and Lego—sitting in metal chairs by a fire at a warehouse party at an hour that was no longer late but early.

Lego moved. Not away—toward. He extracted himself from the space Hong had occupied and relocated, in a single, fluid motion, to the arm of William's chair, perching there like a bird on a branch, one platform boot hooked behind the chair leg, his body angled toward both William and Est simultaneously.

"So," Lego said, settling. His weight pressed against William's shoulder—casually, naturally, the way a person leaned against a wall. William didn't flinch. Didn't adjust. Accepted the weight with the practiced ease of a person who was accustomed to being leaned on by this specific human. "Tell me everything."

"Everything about what?" Est asked.

"About you. Hong never brings people. He's like a cat—very selective about who enters the territory. If he brought you, there's a reason."

"The reason is we were at the same company party and I was standing alone." Est said.

"That's the logistics. I want the reason."

Tui laughed. Low, warm—the laugh of a person who had watched Lego do this before and still found it charming.

"Leave the man alone, Sweetheart," Tui said. "He just got here."

"I'm not interrogating him. I'm welcoming him. There's a difference."

"The difference being?"

"Interrogation doesn't come with ice tea." Lego held up his glass, which had appeared—somehow, from somewhere, Est hadn't seen anyone bring it—and shook it. The ice crunched. He bit a piece.

"You should try the ice here," Lego said to Est. "Seriously. It's the best ice in Bangkok."

"I'll take your word for it."

"That's what everyone says, and then I make them try it, and then they agree." He extended the glass. "Try."

Est looked at the glass. At the ice. At the light-colored eyes above the glass, the eyes that were patient and insistent and completely, absurdly serious about ice.

He took a piece. He chewed.

"Well?" Lego asked.

"It's—" Est paused. "Actually really good ice."

Lego beamed. The beam was nuclear. The kind of smile that was not just facial but full-body, the kind that made the space buns bounce and the rings glint and the platform boots tap against the chair leg.

"Told you," Lego said, and he sounded as satisfied as if he had personally manufactured the ice himself.

William, beneath Lego's leaning weight, caught Est's eye. The look was small, private—the conspiratorial glance of a person who was saying yes, he's always like this and yes, it's wonderful without using any words.

Est stayed.

He talked with William. William was shy—the shyness not a wall but a filter, a fine mesh through which words passed carefully, each one examined before release. But he was kind. And once the filter had processed and approved a conversational topic, the words came steadily, precisely, the way a good photograph developed—slowly, but with increasing clarity.

They shared some interests. They talked about photography and scent and the way certain images carried weight that couldn't be explained by composition alone. William asked about his perfume collection—not the surface question, not how many do you have, but how do you organize them—and when Est said by mood, William's eyes widened, and he said: "That's how I organize my negatives. Not by date. By what I was feeling."

They talked, and the fire crackled, and the night air carried the woodsmoke, and Est felt—

He felt the edges soften. The boundaries between himself and the night, between his interior and the exterior, between the armor and the air. The Dirty Martini was in his blood. The shot was in his blood. The cigarette smoke was in his lungs, being absorbed, being processed, the nicotine reaching the receptors that the years of public restraint had starved.

Lego's weight on William's chair shifted. He was talking to Tui now—something about a new nail design, something about an upcoming campaign, his voice rising and falling with the conversational rhythm of a person who communicated in exclamation points. At one point, he leaned back too far and nearly fell off the chair arm, and William's hand shot out—fast, automatic—and caught Lego's cardigan, steadying him without interrupting his own sentence.

"—Liam, I'm fine—"

"Thank you for catching me though."

"Always."

The word—always—was said without emphasis. Without weight. The way you said always when it was simply true.

The night passed. He kept drinking.

Hong and Nut returned. Hong had Est's Dirty Martini. Nut had a first-aid kit in his pocket—Est saw the outline of it when Nut sat down—because of course he did, because Nut was the kind of person who carried a first-aid kit to a warehouse party. Hong had also brought, without being asked, a bowl of edamame and some kind of grilled mushroom skewer, which he placed on the concrete between the chairs.

"Eat," Hong said to Est. Not a suggestion.

"I'm fine."

"You've had two cocktails and a shot and you've eaten nothing since the company party. Eat."

"How do you know I didn't eat at the company party?"

"Because you were standing alone holding a drink with both hands. People who eat at parties hold their drink with one hand. You held yours with two. That means you never picked up a plate."

The observation was so specific, so precise, so relentlessly accurate that Est couldn't argue with it. He ate an edamame.

"He's very observant for someone who pretends not to care," Nut said, nodding toward Hong.

"I don't care," Hong said. "I just have eyes."

"Mmm," Nut said. The sound was warm. Disagreeing.

Lego, who had migrated from William's chair arm to the ground, where he was sitting cross-legged on a cushion that had materialized from somewhere, reached for a mushroom skewer with his long, black nails—delicately, precisely, the nails functioning as both tools and art.

"Hoshi always takes care of people and then denies it," Lego said, chewing. "It's his whole brand."

"My brand is grunge and sarcasm."

"Your brand is grunge and sarcasm and secretly feeding your coworkers at 2 AM."

"Shut up."

"Make me." Lego grinned. The grin was fearless—the grin of a person who knew exactly how far they could push and who knew, with absolute certainty, that the person they were pushing would never actually push back.

Hong threw an edamame shell at him. Lego caught it.

The sequence fractured. He drank more. Another Dirty Martini—the third? The fourth? The number dissolved. The olive count dissolved. The precision dissolved, and what replaced it was not blurriness but a different kind of clarity, the clarity that arrived when the analytical mind stopped counting and started experiencing, when the filters came down and the raw data poured through unprocessed.

The images flashed. Not in sequence. Not in narrative order. In fragments, in sensory clusters, each one complete and incompatible with chronology.

Lego's laugh—high, bright, the laugh bouncing off the warehouse walls like a thrown ball. Lego performing something—a gesture, a story, his body becoming the narrative, the space buns bobbing, the nails flashing.

Tui's camera—the Nikon, raised, the shutter clicking, the sound small and precise amid the fire-sound and the music-sound and the voice-sound. Tui photographing something—someone—the flash not firing, because Tui didn't use flash, because Tui believed that natural light was the only honest light.

William's eyes. Brown. Looking at him. Not the quick, assessing look of a professional encounter but the slow, sustained look of a person who was seeing and being seen and was not looking away. The look lasted. It lasted longer than politeness. Longer than curiosity. It lasted the specific, unmeasurable length of a look that was not a look but a conversation, a conversation conducted entirely in the language of I see you and I am not afraid of what I see.

Nut lifting Lego. At some point—the timestamp lost—Nut had simply picked Lego up, the way you picked up a child or a very important, fragile thing, and Lego had shrieked—delighted, not frightened—and kicked his platform boots in the air, and Nut had spun him once and set him down and said "Cutie" in a voice so genuinely affectionate that the word sounded like a prayer.

Hong playing guitar. Somewhere, somehow, a guitar had appeared—acoustic, battered, the strings worn—and Hong had played something soft, something melodic, something that was not the grunge or the sarcasm or the armor but the thing underneath, the hidden peony, the vulnerability that he kept on his hip where

only he could see it. The music had been quiet. The fire had crackled alongside it.

And William's eyes. Again. Still. Brown and steady and seeing.

He kissed someone.

The detail arrived in his memory without context—a mouth, the taste of alcohol and something sweeter, something unfamiliar, the press of lips that were soft and certain and asking permission even in the act of taking. The kiss was not aggressive. It was not desperate. It was tender—the specific, careful tenderness of a person who kissed the way they touched, with attention, with inquiry, with the patient, focused precision of hands that wanted to understand what they were holding before they held it tighter.

And then—

In the blink of an eye.

His apartment. The apartment. The good light—the light that came through the windows of his high-end, ultra-modern condo in the quiet, new-money district, the light that fell on the marble surfaces and the charcoal linens and the climate-controlled shelf where a hundred perfumes stood in their mood-organized rows, silent witnesses.

The perfume shelf. The bottles glinting. Vetiver. Iris. Cold glass.

The stranger was in his bed.

The person was warm. The person was here. The person was touching him—touching his face, his hair, his neck—with hands that were neither rushed nor mechanical but attentive, mapping, the hands of a person who understood surfaces and what lay beneath them.

He longed for the touch. That was the truth underneath the alcohol and the blur and the fractured images. He longed for it. The longing was older than the night, older than the party, older than the company event and the Dirty Martinis and Hong's flat voice saying upstairs. The longing was chronic. It lived in the apartment with him—in the blackout curtains and the soundproofed walls and the crystal jar of small, overlooked objects on his bedside table. It lived in the noise-canceling headphones on the marble pedestal by the door. It lived in the precision of his solitude, in the architecture of his independence, in the house in suburban Maryland where help was an admission of system failure and birthday texts arrived precisely on time and conveyed precisely nothing.

He was willing to accept anything.

The man pampered him. The hands moved over his face, his hair, his neck, with the specific, attentive quality of hands that were paying attention to what they were touching, that were not performing affection but practicing it, the way a person practiced an instrument or a craft—seriously, reverently, with the understanding that the thing being touched deserved the full attention of the person touching it.

"You're beautiful."

The words came from above him. Spoken softly—not whispered, not murmured, but spoken at the volume of a person who was close enough to be quiet and meant what they were saying. The voice was warm. The voice was—He couldn't place it. The voice was there and the voice was real and the voice was warm but the voice would not attach itself to a face.

Kisses. Repeated. Lips on his lips. Lips on his neck—the spot beneath his jaw, the spot that the turtleneck covered, the spot that no one reached because the turtleneck was the boundary, the architecture, the wall that said this far and no further. The turtleneck was gone now. The wall was gone. And the lips found the spot and stayed there, and Est's body arched—

"Is everything alright?"

The voice. Pausing. The hands stopping. The lips pulling back.

"Are you too drunk?"

The concern in the voice. Not performative. Not the scripted concern of a person who was asking because asking was the correct thing to do. Real concern—the kind that was willing to stop, that was willing to lose the momentum and the heat and the charged, electric closeness of two bodies in a dark room because the answer to the question mattered more than the continuation.

Est was drunk. The room was soft. The edges were gone. The analytical mind was asleep—not offline, but sleeping, the way a computer slept, the screen dark but the processes still running beneath. And the person above him was asking, genuinely, whether the drunkenness invalidated the desire.

Est silenced him with more kisses. Because the answer was: yes, he was drunk. And: no, the drunkenness did not invalidate the desire. The desire was older than the drunk. The desire was the thing that the drunk had revealed, not created—the thing that lived beneath the vetiver and the iris and the noise-canceling headphones and the turtleneck and the clinical, defensive, architectural scent that he curated to keep the world at precisely the right distance.

The stranger caressed him, his hands in his hair, his neck, his body, and Est could only moan beneath him, melting into the touch the way wax melted when a candle had burned long enough—slowly, completely, the structure giving way to the heat.

He wanted more, though in his memory his face was blurry, his breathing ragged, his moans echoing in the soundproofed room that had been designed for silence and was now full of sound—their sound, the sound of two people finding each other in the dark.

But he could still recall the tattoo on his back.

The tattoo. On the person's back. Visible when the person moved above him—the back arching, the skin stretching, the ink visible in the low light. Not finished. The lines—some complete, some trailing off, some stopping mid-stroke, the design half-realized, a work in progress, a painting with a blank corner.

An unfinished tattoo.

Heavy breaths. Moans. The sounds filling the apartment—filling the space that was usually silent, usually controlled, usually the gallery-like, temperature-regulated environment of a man who used his living space the way he used his scent, as a defense, as a curation, as a wall.

His chest burned. Not with pain. With the opposite of pain—with the heat of being touched after a long cold, the specific, almost painful relief of warmth returning to a body that had been numb so long it had forgotten what warmth felt like.

His fingers tingled. The extremities. The parts farthest from the heart, the parts that went cold first and warmed last. Everything around him felt soft. The charcoal linens. The body above him. The air. The night.

A kiss on his forehead.

Gentle. Almost unbearably gentle. The kind of kiss that was not about desire but about care—about the specific, deliberate act of placing your lips on the most vulnerable part of a person's face and saying, with the gesture alone: I see you. I see all of you. The armor and the architecture and the loneliness underneath. And I am still here.

And then—

The light was on his face.

Morning light. The Bangkok morning, coming through windows he had forgotten to cover—the blackout curtains open, the light uninvited, pouring in with the democratic, unapologetic insistence of a sun that did not care about hangovers or fragmented memories or the specific, vertiginous disorientation of waking up in your own bed and not knowing who had been in it.

On the ceiling. On the white sheets. The charcoal linens tangled, half on the bed, half on the floor.

He was alone.

The bed was unmade, the pillow beside his still carrying the impression of a head that was no longer there. His body still seemed to vibrate—not with energy but with the afterimage of touch, the phantom sensation of hands that had been there and were not there now, the way a bell vibrated after being struck, the sound gone but the metal still humming.

Est stared at the ceiling.

The ceiling was white. Featureless. The ceiling offered nothing. The question assembled itself. Slowly. Not rushing. Piece by piece, the way a scent assembled itself—the top notes arriving first, bright and obvious, and then the heart, and then the base, the deep, persistent, earth-level truth that remained after everything else had evaporated.

Who?

An unfinished tattoo.

The touch. The concern. Is everything alright? Are you too drunk? The voice that asked before continuing. The hands that mapped rather than grabbed. The forehead kiss.

The face—The face wouldn't resolve. The memory held the sensation—the warmth, the softness, the feeling of being seen and held and wanted—but not the image. The image was blurred. Alcohol and darkness and the specific, self-protective amnesia of a brain that had been running on empty for so long that when it finally received what it needed, it couldn't process the source, only the substance.

Who?

He reached for his phone on the bedside table.

He stared at the ceiling.

The light came in.

The question stayed.